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Requiem for a Dominatrix

(posted in 2013)

On April 8, 2013, the western world lost a grand dame, an iconic figure, a woman admired by millions while dismissed by others as just another lady in a bouffant hairdo. She came from a modest social background yet she made her way to the top, a woman who could perform winningly in what is arguably the most competitive arena of life. I am, of course, speaking of Annette Funicello, singer and Hollywood actress.

Oh wait, some readers may have assumed I was pumping for Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of Great Britain, who also died on April 8, 2013. No, Thatcher and Funicello had nothing in common, save for the bouffant hairdo and date of death.

Annette Funicello was a child star in the late 1950s, one of the Mouseketeers, complete with enormous Mickey Mouse ears, appearing on Walt Disney's "Mickey Mouse Club." As a teenager, she turned out hit tunes and captivated adolescent hearts in Beach Blanket movies.

How many hearts did Thatcher captivate in her teenage years? Did she even have teenage years? Or did she not vault directly from early childhood into late adulthood? In any case, she was no day at the beach.

The most memorable moment Thatcher ever provided for me was her adulatory spiel to the blood-drenched Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, as the two of them sat in a cozy room in Britain. Pinochet was resisting deportation to Spain to stand trial as a war criminal. He was rescued from justice by Prime Minister Tony Blair who regularly sucked up to reactionary war mongers especially those "friendly to the West."

Without stint Thatcher poured out her gratitude and admiration to a smiling Pinochet for "saving Chile from the communists," and restoring peace, liberty, and stability. She made no mention of the many thousands of Chileans whom Pinochet imprisoned, tortured, executed, or drove into exile. On that visit to Pinochet, Thatcher was wearing her fascism right under her makeup.

Would Annette Funicello ever kiss a dictator's butt the way Thatcher did? I think not. During her stardom, Annette described herself as “the queen of teen,” and millions of fans close to her age agreed. As one critic put it, "Young audiences appreciated her sweet, forthright appeal, and

parents saw her as the perfect daughter." Here was the girl you might take home to meet and marry your son. Would you say the same about Lady Thatcher? Only if you really hated your kid.

Thatcher served for eleven years as Prime Minister, waging war upon the Irish, the Argentines, and the social democracy that existed in Britain. Be it health care, education, mining, transportation, housing, utilities or other public industries---many were privatized, deregulated, or cutback while customer rates and costs sharply increased. Corporate salaries rose to obscene heights while wages remained flat or declined. Labor unions were broken. Under Thatcher's reign, the free market was king, producing ever greater profits and lower taxes for the superrich and ever greater hardship for the populace. A poll tax was imposed upon the people, an equal sum to be paid by both the dustman and the duke.

Someone once said that Margaret Thatcher satisfied the average Englishman's longing for the perfect dominatrix. No doubt about it, she could deliver pain. The Iron Lady should best be remembered as the Leather Lady. Indeed, today Thatcherism leaves its dreary imprint not only on the Conservative Party but---thanks also to Tony Blair---on a Labor Party that accepts most of her regressive policies.

During her reign, Thatcher also pursued her "school-girl political crush for President Reagan" as one Labor MP pronounced during a parliamentary debate. Indeed, she and Reagan adored each other, politically speaking. With hands joined, as it were, they created in their respective countries more wealth for the few and more poverty for the many. They served as a free-market inspiration to one another as they advanced back into the dark ages.

President Barack Obama, who loves to grovel before rightwing leaders (note his adoring depiction of Reagan as a "transformative" president), issued a cloying statement following Thatcher's death: "With the passing of Baroness Margaret Thatcher, the world has lost one of the great champions of freedom and liberty, and America has lost a true friend. . . . Here in America, many of us will never forget her standing shoulder to shoulder with President Reagan, reminding the world that we are not simply carried along by the currents of history—we can shape them with moral conviction, unyielding courage and iron will. " Obama invites nausea.

If only for a brief moment, let us get back to our girl Annette Funicello, the only laudable personage in this sorry parade. While Thatcher was cutting health services, Annette was championing the campaign against multiple sclerosis, a disease she herself grappled with for more than 25 years, until death took her at age 70.

Speaking of disease: long after they left office, both Reagan and Thatcher were inundated with honors; their material lives groaned with abundance. But their respective mental lives ended in dismal poverty, that is, in dementia. Their brains had turned to porridge.

There must be many reasons why people suffer dementia. But in regard to Reagan and Thatcher, I suspect it was a self-generated condition. When one tirelessly confects so many fictional representations and twisty untruths---all in the cause of callous plunder and greater social inequality---it must put an inordinate strain on one's brain.

Meanwhile the anti-Thatcher theme song, "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" now enjoys a massive revival in Britain and retains a top slot on the charts. The people are dancing in the streets.

All I can say is "May she rest in peace." (I'm talking about Annette.)

Michael Parenti's most recent book is *The Face of Imperialism*. Soon to be published is his childhood memoir *Waiting for Yesterday: Pages from a Street Kid's Life*.

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